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ABSTRACT

Four African-American women, participants in PROBE (Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education), a program to prepare low-income women in Pennsylvania for jobs through computer and communications skills training, were interviewed about their attitudes toward learning. The four were single-parent welfare recipients in their late 20s or early 30s. The women expressed frustration about their early learning experiences. They said they had experienced racial prejudice and lack of motivation from teachers. They also wished they had listened sooner to others about the importance of education. Several of the women were now motivated to continue their education in order to set an example for their children. They hoped to learn how to use computers as a method of obtaining a good-paying job. They were surprised, however, at the necessity of studying communications skills, although they appreciated them. They disliked the reading component of the program. Evaluation of the program resulted in recommendations for increasing the self-paced method of studying and in continuing individual contact with participants to improve their sense of self-esteem and motivate them to complete the program. (KC)

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How Some Low Income Women View Learning as They Prepare for the Work Force: A Comparative Case Study

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Women, many who are minorities and undereducated, will comprise the majority of the work force in the 21st century. The personal stories of four who participated in a Computer/Communication Skills program provide insights into how they view learning as they prepare for the work world. This unpublished study served as the source for a presentation at the 40th Annual Adult Education Conference of the America Association for Adult and Continuing Education held in Montreal, Canada, October 15-18, 1991.

Setting

PROBE, Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education, is a nonprofit agency in its 14th year of operation. It offers career counseling and job readiness classes to single parents and displaced homemakers in Cumberland, Dauphin, Labanon and Perry counties at its Harrisburg and Lebanon, PA sites.

The director, a Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg faculty member, oversees a staff of twelve who assume diverse responsibilities ranging from coordinating programs and counseling to performing bookkeeping and clerical/ secretarial duties.

Within this basic framework, a Personal Computer/Communication Skills program was initiated in 1987, designed to train primarily single welfare women who completed 120 hours of PROBE's job readiness preparation. The participants (adult learners) were drawn from a tri-county (inner city base) and a rural (Lebanon base) population.

Outcomes

The need for the program was determined by such factors as

* newspaper job listings that specified among the qualifications competency in computer and communication skills;

* results from a PROBE survey sent to mid-size and small business owners that placed a priority on employee competence in reading, writing and reasoning;

* legislation designed to provide job training for the underserved and most difficult to place that would promote a transition from welfare to self-sufficiency;

* research results (Hudson Institute Report Workforce 2000, primarily) that address demographic changes and the kind of skills required from a potential majority pool of women and minorities who will bring to the employment scene a different kind of academic background and personal history than has been evidenced previously.

The primary goals of the program were

- to provide 20 single welfare women with marketable computer and communication skills to enable them to gain entry level positions at no less than $6.50 hourly;

- to provide employers with productive, competent employees in an evolving technological work world.

Process

To meet the perceived needs and achieve the primary goals, a program was designed to provide 12 hours of computer training and 12 hours of communication skills weekly for approximately 32 weeks. The computer component initially generated both apprehension of the unknown as well as fascination with machinery that could be used for business and play. The instructors allayed fears as the group slowly moved through the various programs. For the most part, through repetition and persistence, skills were required that, minimally, would be adequate for entry level positions. A few of the women excelled in those areas that appealed.

The objective of the communication segment designed and facilitated by the coordinator was the achievement of standard English oral and written proficiency as required for the work site. The challenge was in conveying the need for such proficiency and its correlation to the computer, specifically

the word processing functions. For the women, one was a matter of manual dexterity; the other, "school work."

As part of the process, time was allotted for group discussion about the learning experience and for journal keeping as a record of progress and growth. The journal entries revealed a range of emotions and information. It became obvious there were stories to be told. There were expectations that at times weren't met, and frustrations with the process and the welfare system that often interfered with the learning, such as demanding that the women appear for appointments when they were scheduled for class. The women were in a double bind; they were chastised if they came to class instead of meeting with case workers. At the same time they were penalized if they were not in class because their child care and transportation expenses were tied in with class attendance.

Reflecting on these factors that influenced outcomes and as an adult educator, a personal goal emerged, that of learning more about this relatively small group, primarily from African American, Puerto Rican and Philippine cultures who may well reflect some of the patterns or images projected for the workforce of the 21st century. Four of the African American women agreed to be interviewed for this comparative case study, willing and anxious to share their stories.

Interviews

All four are single parents on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) payments; they are in their late twenties or early thirties. M. is articulate and projects a strong sense of self and direction. She resents

having been "ghettoized," resents being on welfare. She recalls the indignities to which her parents were subjected as blue collar workers.

> I watched my mother and father work domestic. My mother cleaned houses, my father was a mere maintain [maintenance] man. Honest job but he worked awfully hard. My mother worked awfully hard and she always tired. It seems as if our parents, they just struggled . . . it was meanness but financially they should be rewarded a lot better because they worked so hard, you know, and I said when I grow up I'm going to make something out of myself, and not that I'm not already somebody, but I'm going to make something out of myself so that my children, I don't have to work so hard . . ..

Since the birth of the first of her two children, at 16, she has maintained her own living quarters, but now realizes that education is essential to provide for her daughters and herself the kind of lifestyle she holds as a goal.

B., on the other hand, is introverted and soft spoken. She is devoted to her young son. She, too, lives independently, unhappy that poverty forces her into an undesirable neighborhood she considers detrimental to her son's upbringing. Although she was recognized for computer competency, when she started the communications class her English skills were marginal. She has decided to improve primarily for her son and is working on her GED. When that is achieved, she will attend a community college to work further on her English.

P. is bright but impatient to get on with "it," whatever "it" may be. She acknowledges something is missing and gets depressed but can't articulate what the void is that needs to be filled.

> I feel as though I need to learn more, like I feel as though I'm missing something but I don't know what and it might have a lot to do with what I really want to do, but I feel like, I don't really know how to say [it] . . . I would just like to be comfortable, just doing something I enjoy doing.

She has two children but does not speak of them often, nor does she talk about other family. She has probably benefited more from her early education than the other women and is an avid reader.

F. is warm, exuberant and refreshingly honest. She doesn't belabor problems; she just "gets on with it." F. speaks affectionately of a supportive family who never judged her harshly for dropping out of school after the 9th grade. She has three children for whom she is trying to provide the same kind of caring environment she experienced as a child. She says they consider themselves a strong family unit. She has many gaps in her education but has set the achievement of a GED as the first objective in her goal of financial security.

Formal Educational Background

The formal educational experiences of the four varied. M. felt there was no one within the school who ever cared; she says she wasn't even aware of the existence of guidance counselors. B. attended the same school but, in spite of her reserve, knew how to access the guidance office. Neither could recall teachers as being significant in their school experience. Even though they considered themselves to have been good students, they did admit to lack of interest in their classes. They were impatient to get on with life.

B. explained, "I wanted to work without [education]. I didn't want to be on welfare, and I felt as though I could have worked instead of go to school." For M., "I was a teenage parent and I did want to take the short cut, get a good job and I'd get a good education later as long as I could avoid the reality that I had to get more education." Neither felt high school prepared them for employment. In addition, M. is bitter about the high school "system," that it perpetuated low self-esteem. "The school system didn't want to waste time on those that weren't really trying to do something."

P. also considered herself a good student. Only one teacher whose name or course she can't remember remains a positive factor or force because this teacher was interested and cared about the students, created innovative methods to motivate them to perform better, to challenge them.

> She made you try hard . . . when we had tests she put you in a chair according to your test grades . . . and it really helps you a lot, and, you know, it try to make you try hard so you know you can beat the next person . . . sitting in that top seat felt really really good . . . the teacher, she just made you feel good and that was kind of like a learning process when she put you in this seat there.

F. "really hated school," mostly because of peer pressure to conform, although she admits she may have been part of the wrong crowd. She doesn't consider herself anything but an "OK" student, felt overwhelmed by the learning process. She wished she had been taught to understand the material, its application to life and the reason for learning it. F. (and M.) mentioned racial discrimination, "snobbishness" on the part of teachers, of having been prejudged on the basis of skin color.

> Some kids are bad but some kids really want to learn in school and the ones who really want to learn sometimes the teacher's just not there, maybe because they're in the wrong group or they're hanging with the wrong people . . . the teacher just don't want to be bothered with them. I think a teacher should be there for everyone and want to help everybody, not a racial differences or nothing like that . . . but there are some there who see a black person and even if they want to learn they don't help them as much and that hurts and I guess they don't know that it hurts but, I mean, you're a human being and your feelings do get hurt quicker than, you know, some people think.

Learning as an Adult

All four registered surprise when asked to describe themselves as adult learners. They felt that the only difference in the process now is to learn more to earn more. P.'s reaction was, "I'm always willing to learn and always willing to try new things, so I don't think there's too much difference. Now I think I need to learn more but I don't think there's too much difference as far as my learning." M. shared, "I haven't always been a self-starter but I do realize now that I need more education. And as an adult learner . . . education . . . it's more valuable to me, you know, because I'm hungry for it . . . ."

They regret not having had anyone explain the value of an education to them during their high school years. Would they have done things differently, they were asked? They were not sure, but attention to learning earlier would have made life easier, they felt; they wouldn't have wasted so much time,

either, in trying to improve their economic status. "I just wished I listened back then and I would be more ahead," reflected F.

In terms of learning goals and as a result of the computer training, both P. and F. want to be computer engineers. They want to know how to take the machines apart, see what makes them work. The barrier, they perceive, is the college degree they learned was essential to achieve such a goal. They consider this an unachievable goal, however, because of their young children, their financial status and the kind of academic commitment that it would require. P. adds, "I know you have to go to school for quite a few years and I don't feel I have the years in me to go to school. I have two kids, and maybe if my son was older and in school then I would be more comfortable but right now, you know, I just don't have it in me to go to school."

B. is taking one step at a time, putting off her decision-making until after she completes the GED and the remedial courses she will be taking at the community college.

> I know that no matter where or how, we need an education and I made up my mind that I have to go and get it and that I will go and get it and it's benefiting my son too because I want him to go to college also and me being a role model for him that will show him to do it also and I have to put him through college so I have to go and get financially set to put him through college.
>
> According to M.
>
> as a teenager, sometimes we don't take things, you know, life so serious but when we realize that nobody's going to do anything for you, you have to do it for yourself. And education, no one can take

that from you. And that's something, once I acquire it, it's mine. [As] An adult learner, education is more valuable to me . . . because I can see myself administrative or executive, beyond executive secretary. I can see myself administrative and I'd like to go back to college to learn everything about that.

In terms of how best they like to learn, for F. there was no hesitation--with a coach. She feels her academic inequities so strongly, recognizes that learning for her is a tedious process. Once she understands the material well enough to be tested, she says, she is secure and the information stays. F. has problems with reading in general; however, she says that if she wants to try a recipe, sew a garment or learn about computers, she has no problems reading the instructions, because that is different.

P. reads extensively and feels secure in her ability to learn. B. also reads to learn and will go to the library for answers. Both P. and B. prefer to learn in a quiet environment, either alone or for B., with a partner for support. M. did not state preferences; all four, however, repeated frequently the desirability of knowledgeable, patient teachers who were there to facilitate the learning process. F. added

I always want someone smarter than I to help me just like I was when I was in school. Some people are just so smart. My teacher at school she is just so smart, I mean, she do algebra problems in her head and I'm like "Whew, you are so smart, why can't I do that" and she's like "You just need to learn" . . . so sometimes when I sit down to watch TV I make my hand like a pencil and my lap is a piece of paper and when people say things I try to write it out real quick

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so I can remember and when people talk I do the same thing. Like she said this and I'm writing down on my arm or wherever my hand is to try to remember, you know, the pros and cons and all that kind of stuff, the adverbs and verbs, it's just I'm so used to one thing that it's so hard [to change].

All four stated that if they had a job they liked, they would aspire for advancement but didn't think in terms of learning to achieve such an objective. They thought that on-the-job performance would constitute the basis for promotion.

Career and Workplace Learning

These women started working outside of the home between the ages of 15 and 17. They had their first child between the ages of 16 and 19. Their initial jobs were of necessity, dead end, usually one menial job after another with no benefits and no future. Poverty, degradation generated by their welfare status, a sense of responsibility as single parents and the realization that jobs merely for survival weren't the answer, were listed as triggers for career learning.

They experienced a diminished sense of self when they arrived for PROBE's job readiness classes. They spoke of staff support, the sense of being valued as individuals. As part of the process of being prepared, as welfare recipients, for self-sufficiency, they were given the opportunity for training along with child care and transportation reimbursements. The reasons for entering the program were similar. For example, B. comments,

> Well they had a thing that you could enter PROBE and I just wanted to, you know, try it out . . . and I wasn't thinking that I was getting into computers. I just tried it. I just took a chance.

M.'s response to the question was

> . . . it started with the job readiness . . . I went through the job readiness program and they offered me the great opportunity to take up communications and computer skills and that opened the door for me . . ..

Although they didn't sense any barriers, they appreciated support. When asked what kept them going, M. responded

> My mother saying . . . "Are you up? Are you going to school this morning? You've got to go to the bottom of that hill and catch that ride." . . . I asked her to do it and so she did. She said I will call you every single morning and my daughters would say to me, "Are you going to school today?" And I have to explain that to my daughters, so I have to . . .

B.'s support was a relative, also a mentor who is both reassuring and critical. "My cousin, she's always there for me and she asks me tough questions . . . if I cry, because I'm a crier, she says 'think about it, you can cry but think about it. What are you going to do next,' and that's something I have to stop and think and she helps me a lot."

F. has continued family support. Her mother, also a single parent, turned to nursing education after the birth of two daughters. The mother is proud of F.'s independent decision to also turn to education, to eliminate some of the academic deficiencies. An uncle also contacts her regularly, inquiring about her goals and offering encouragement.

> Nobody never pushed me to do anything. They were always beside me. I think if they pushed me I wouldn't have had three kids but then I don't know cause they never did, they was like this was your decision and we will be beside you no matter what.

The training experience produced mixed reactions. M. and B. found it positive and enriching, they said. For P. and F. the computer part was a disappointment. They entered the program mid-year and felt deprived of not having had the complete cycle. F. explained,

> I expected to get out of it more than what I did . . . I felt like my class got the poop end of the stick cause we had tutors . . . and they wasn't a great teacher. They confused us if anything. When things got so confusing you had to get your computer papers and do . . . and that's the way I learned most of the stuff . . . now see that was something I liked and [it] piqued my interest and I went on and done it and came out good . . ..

P. confirms that feeling, "I expected more, more education on the computers . . . because I expected the program to be longer." As far as the communications segment, P. continued, "It helped me with things that I might have thought I was doing right and as far as when we did those sentences and little things like that, it helped. Helped me with, you know, how to put words in sentences and what I might have thought was right, wasn't right." The reading segment of the course elicited an almost unanimous "I hated it."

> How has the training changed the lives of these women? For M., it was a way to advance my situation. Another door to open for me because I needed to know that I can achieve, you know, I needed to

know because my self-esteem was pretty shaky at the time we [were] entering the program . . . I've tried and failed at several other things in my life but this is not one of them . . . I felt so good about myself that day of graduation and there were highs and lows throughout the whole course but positive thinking.

B. adds, "I need the skills that will benefit me and my son and [I now know] education is a way out . . . now I'm sticking with it . . . it will help me, you know." P.'s response was that, "In a sense . . . it [is] something new that I learned . . . it gave me something new to look forward to that I know I can do, but it all comes back to the experience [for a résume] and that stops me." F.'s response was that

it gave me more computer knowledge, that was it. Yes, it made a difference. I mean I can go sit down [at] a computer and know what I'm doing. The learning has changed my life a lot cause sometimes I think before I speak now. Sometimes I don't and I hear myself and I be like, "You're wrong, you're totally wrong, you're talking wrong . . . but you do it anyway because you're so used to it, that it just comes out but in the back of your mind you're saying, "Now you know you're speaking the wrong language . . ." My mom, she even seen how I changed, she said, "You talk so much better now . . . I mean, you have come a long way." . . . and that makes me feel so good . . . I just wish school work would come easier to me than which it does, but I'll get it. And thank you . . . this was fun.

Evaluation and Implication

According to the Philadelphia Inquirer (August 4, 1991), a "radical change" is being presented for consideration by the Philadelphia school board, one that would drastically change the traditional grade structure, beginning with the elementary grades. The concept proposes grouping students in clusters. Rather than being promoted or failed on the basis of grades, the students would advance after expected learning outcomes were met. The clusters would involve about 100 children of varying ages and ability working with four to six teachers who stay with them three years at a time.

The promoters of this concept agree that repeating failed courses leads to school drop out rather than remediation. Additionally, the cluster method, an ungraded concept, would be especially beneficial to low income children from whom society seems to expect so little. Were it possible to turn back the clock for the women in the study and expose them to the cluster concept, would that erase the negative perceptions and limiting outcomes of their early formal education? From their stories, the traditional school model generated boredom, low self-esteem and minimal academic achievement in spite of potential skills. In addition, according to them, they were subjected to racial prejudice and suffered the stigma of being both poor and single parents.

The adult education philosophy that the PROBE communications class followed was analogous to Wilkerson's charge to educators (p. 141), "that we learn to cultivate talent and ability in whatever package it appears." This seemed appropriate for a culturally diverse group whose stories validated Wilkerson's comments about "the presumption of inferiority [being] one of the most persistent barriers to minority achievement" (p. 133).

The interviews underscored assumptions on which the communications class was based, that these women should be offered the opportunity to acquire and/or hone skills that would lead to stable and stimulating employment within an evolving technological environment, at the same time enhancing self-esteem. The staff was also responding to studies (Hudson Institute report) that projected significant demographic and work place changes that would require more sophisticated reading, writing, reasoning abilities, with post secondary education a possible requirement for job entry, where women and minorities would be the majority of the new wave of employees.

The women in the class, unaware of such factors, were responding to a need for economic security, realizing that menial jobs merely perpetuated welfare dependence. They were also unaware that their decision corresponded to findings that most adults returned to school because they were dissatisfied with their lives and regarded education as the key to a better one (Schlossberg, p. 334).

Their reaction to career learning at PROBE centered on the computer component. They felt that demonstrable proficiency in that area would ensure employment: the computer, after all, dominates our lives. Some had difficulty coming to terms with basic literacy which Martin and Ross-Gordon define as "the mastry of the oral, cultural and print communication and strategies essential to the independent functioning and learning in the workplace (p. 51). At times they struggled with standard English forms so that their community language, though rich culturally, would not become a barrier to their success. Ramsey (p. 191) considers this a crucial part of teaching with a multicultural perspective.

Computer competency, without enhanced basic skills, could very well relegate the women to a lower tier of employees. Another variable that could negatively influence the realization of their goals is their having been subjected to routine, simple work since entry into the work world. Schlossberg (p. 320) cites that women whose work was substantially complex and nonroutinized had greater intellectual flexibility. If the prognosis for continuing education and higher levels of skills for job entry come to pass, the interviewees will be faced with further adjustments in their preparation.

On the other hand, it is not a one way street. Employers, educators and human resource personnel need to adopt "a way of looking" at the emerging potential majority--women and minorities--in an "attentive" way, to borrow Simone Weil's words (Belenky, p. 99). If they were to read the responses to the interview questions, they would see that in spite of fragmented school patterns, the women want to work, want to improve their condition. Contrary to Luttrell's observation (p. 42) that white working class women seek knowledge to emplower themselves, the African American women's decision was based on the same reason; however, their empowerment was more typically within the female mode of trying to make life better, primarily for their children. B., one of the interviewees, is a prime example.

The employment world needs to recognize that "the women's ways of knowing are embedded in community, family and work relationships" (Luttrell, p. 33). This should be an advantage if, indeed, we are moving from a hierarchical structure in the workplace to a participatory one where cooperation and team work are integral to success.

Recommendations

Briscoe offers valuable insights into African Americans in general, with strategies and implications for learning experiences (pp. 10-18). All nine pages should be required reading for employers, educators/trainers and human resource personnel. Responses to the questions in the study reflect some of the points she makes. Especially significant is her last point, "[to] treat deficiencies in learning as challenges to be overcome rather than as cultural pathologies for which amelioration is impossible" (p. 18). The interviewees, at least seem to be responding to the challenge.

The following are more specific recommendations based on the communication class. Low income women need both guidance and counseling--guidance in learning about realistic opportunities and the role of education in achieving their goals, and counseling in their quest for self worth and as a form of support in their decision-making.

As adults preparing for the current needs of the workplace, they should have access to an informal, nonthreatening environment where

* learning is presented in an understandable way
* repetition for reinforcement is structured creatively
* explanations are provided to show the relevance of the learning
* small group instruction is scheduled, allowing also for pairing, for peer support
* participatory learning is encouraged to generate a sense of pride and ownership
**positive reinforcement occurs frequently; little successes serve as big motivators

* patronizing is nonexistent
* shoddy performance is not tolerated but correction is done tactfully. Don't humiliate!
* A smile and a touch of humor go a long way.

This may not constitute the fastest route but it allows for a steady progression, of building solidly and incrementally in order to compensate for previous poor learning habits and instruction. The most important aspect of the learning experience, for this--for all populations, is to value the individual and individual differences. The adult educator should be reminded of F.'s comment, "I can feel the person; you can feel when a person wants to help you and so I tried."

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. Formal Educational Background

A. What schools did you attend? How did you like them?

B. What kind of student do you think you were? Did that change or remain constant?

C. Who are some people you recall as encouraging/facilitating your learning?

Who are some people you recall as discouraging/hindering your learning?

D. What behaviors or characteristics of teachers did you prefer then? Now?

II. Learning as an Adult

A. How do you describe yourself as an adult learner?

B. What kind of things do you enjoy learning?

C. How do you most like to learn: reading / tutoring -- coaching / video tapes / by doing / by observation?

D. How did your early learning/education prepare you for present learning?

E. What learning goals would you like to accomplish within the next five (5) years?

F. Has there been any particular event in your life the past two (2) years that motivated you to seek some new knowledge or skills?

G. What place does learning have in your life right now? Last six (6) months?

H. Who is supportive of your learning efforts? Who is not? (family, friends)

I. From whom do you seek assistance with your learning efforts?